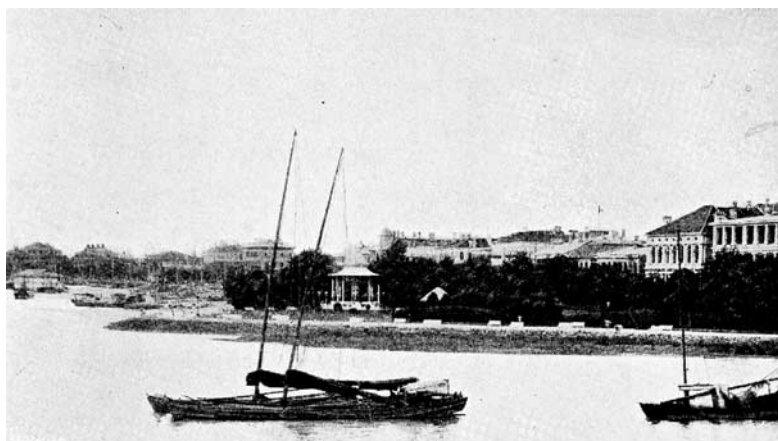


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Alicia E. Neva Little

Excerpt

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SHANGHAI FROM THE RIVER.

PRELUDE.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS.

Arriving in Shanghai.—My First Tea-season.—
 Inside a Chinese City.—Shanghai Gardens.—In
 the Romantic East at last !

I. ARRIVING IN SHANGHAI.

IT was in the merry month of May, 1887, that I first landed in China ; but from the first there was nothing merry about China. It felt bitterly cold, after passing through the tropics ; and in Shanghai one shivered in a warm wrap, as the wind blew direct from the North Pole straight at one's chest, till one day it suddenly turned quite hot, and all clothes felt too heavy. Every one almost knows what Shanghai is like. It has been admirably described over and over again, with its rows of fine European houses fronting

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the river, the beautiful public gardens and well-trodden grass-plats interposed between the two; with its electric lights and its carriages, and great European stores, at which you can buy everything you could possibly want only a very little dearer than in London. There used to be nothing romantic or Eastern about it. Now, darkened by the smoke of over thirty factories, it is flooded by an ever-increasing Chinese population, who jostle with Europeans in the thoroughfare, till it seems as if the struggle between the two races would be settled in the streets of Shanghai, and the European get driven to the wall. For the Chinaman always goes a steady pace, and in his many garments, one upon the top of the other, presents a solid, impenetrable front to the hurrying European; whilst the wheelbarrows on which his womankind are conveyed rush in and out amongst the carriages, colliding here and there with a coolie-drawn ricksha, and always threatening the toes of the foot-passenger. Too often there are no foot-pavements, and the whole motley crowd at its very varying paces is forced on to the muddy street. Ever and anon even now a closed sedan-chair, with some wealthy Chinaman from the adjacent Chinese city, threads its way in and out among the vehicles, noiseless and stealthy, a reminder of China's past glories. There are also now wholly Chinese streets in the foreign settlement, where all the shop-fronts are gorgeous with gilding and fine decorative Chinese characters, where all the shops have signs which hang perpendicularly across the street-way, instead of horizontally over

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☛ Sights of Shanghai

the shop-front as with us, and where Chinese shopkeepers sit inside, bare to the waist, in summer presenting a most unpleasing picture of too much flesh, and in winter masses of fur and satin.

Shanghai has got a capital racecourse, and theatre, and cricket-ground—grounds for every kind of sport, indeed. It has a firstrate club, and an ill-kept museum.



SHANGHAI CREEK, WITH DRAWBRIDGE.

Its sights are the bubbling well and the tea-garden in the China town, believed by globe-trotters, but erroneously, to be the original of the willow-pattern plate. Beside this, there is what is called the Stone Garden, full of picturesque bits. A great deal that is interesting is to be seen in the China town by those who can detach their minds from the dirt; in one part all the houses have drawbridges leading to them. But

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even the Soochow Road in the foreign settlement has never yet been treated pictorially as it deserves. It is the Palais Royal of Chinese Shanghai. At the hour when carriage traffic may only pass one way because of the crowd, it would reward an Alma-Tadema to depict the Chinese dandies filling all its many balconies, pale and silken clad, craning their necks to see, and by the haughtiness of their gaze recalling the decadent Romans of the last days of the empire. Their silken garments, their arched mouths, the coldness of their icy stare, has not yet been duly depicted. *Chun Ti Kung*, by the late Mr. Claude Rees, is so far the only attempt to describe their life. Yet they, too, have souls possibly worth the awakening. With their long nails, their musk-scented garments, their ivory opium-pipes, and delicate arrangements of colours, they cannot be without sensibilities. Do they feel that the Gaul is at the gates, and that the China of their childhood is passing away?

It is this China of their childhood, with here an anecdote and there a descriptive touch, which I hope to make the English reader see dimly as in a glass in the following pages, which are not stored with facts and columns of statistics. People who want more detailed information about China, I would refer to Sir John Davis's always pleasant pages; or to my husband's *Through the Yangtse Gorges*, containing the result of years of observation; or to dear old Marco Polo's account of his travels in the thirteenth century, revived by the painstaking labours of Colonel Yule, and thereby

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● Brown and Muddy

made into one of the best books on China extant. For my part, I shall endeavour to make the reader see China and the Chinese as I have seen them in their homes and at their dinner parties, and living long, oh! such long summer days among them, and yet wearier dark days of winter. And to make the reader the more feel himself amongst the scenes and sights I describe, I mean to adopt various styles, sometimes giving him the very words in which I at the time dashed off my impressions, all palpitating with the strangeness and incongruity of Chinese life, at others giving him the result of subsequent serious reflections.

But here let me record my first great disappointment, because it may be that of many another. Brown mud is the first thing one sees of China. Brown mud accompanies the traveller for miles along the Yangtse River, all along the Peiho, up to brown and muddy Tientsin, and on up to Peking itself. China generally is not at all like the willow-pattern plate. I do not know if I really had expected it to be blue and white; but it was a disappointment to find it so very brown and muddy.

II. MY FIRST TEA-SEASON.

It was dull and leaden all the six hundred miles up the great river Yangtse; and at first it poured nearly all day and every day at Hankow, and we shivered over fires. Nevertheless, in spite of absolutely leaden skies and never a glimpse of sunshine, the coolies and the twenty-years-in-China-and-don't-speak-a-word-of-the-language men wore sun-hats, and pretended to get

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ill from the glare, when any one fresh from England would certainly say it was the damp. The floods were all the while advancing on what looked like a beleaguered city, when we went out on the plain outside, and gazed back at the city wall, with its dark water-line clearly marked all round close to the top.

The country round certainly did not tempt one to go out very often on to the rotten flag-stoned way by which one walked three or four miles in order to reach a one-mile distance as the crow flies, feeble-looking corn and marsh at either side, with an occasional tandem of buffaloes groaning not in unison with the discordant creaking of the cart they drew. Yet we plodded past the little homesteads, each planted on its own artificial hill, faced with stones on the side the floods come from. The very friendly people all used to come out of their cottages, and call out, "Do rest with us awhile," "Come in, do, and have some tea"; but till I spoke a little more Chinese, I did not care to repeat this often: though I rather enjoyed the first time going in and having tea, delicious tea, brought us at once—next a pipe, and then a bowl of water. Nothing could be friendlier than the people; and somehow or other I used to fancy from the first I held quite conversations with them. But what we either of us said to each other in words it is impossible to tell; there is so much one understands without knowing the words. So on and on we used to plod, resisting all kindly pressure to turn in, till gradually the reflection of the setting sun gave a red glow to the water in the ruts,

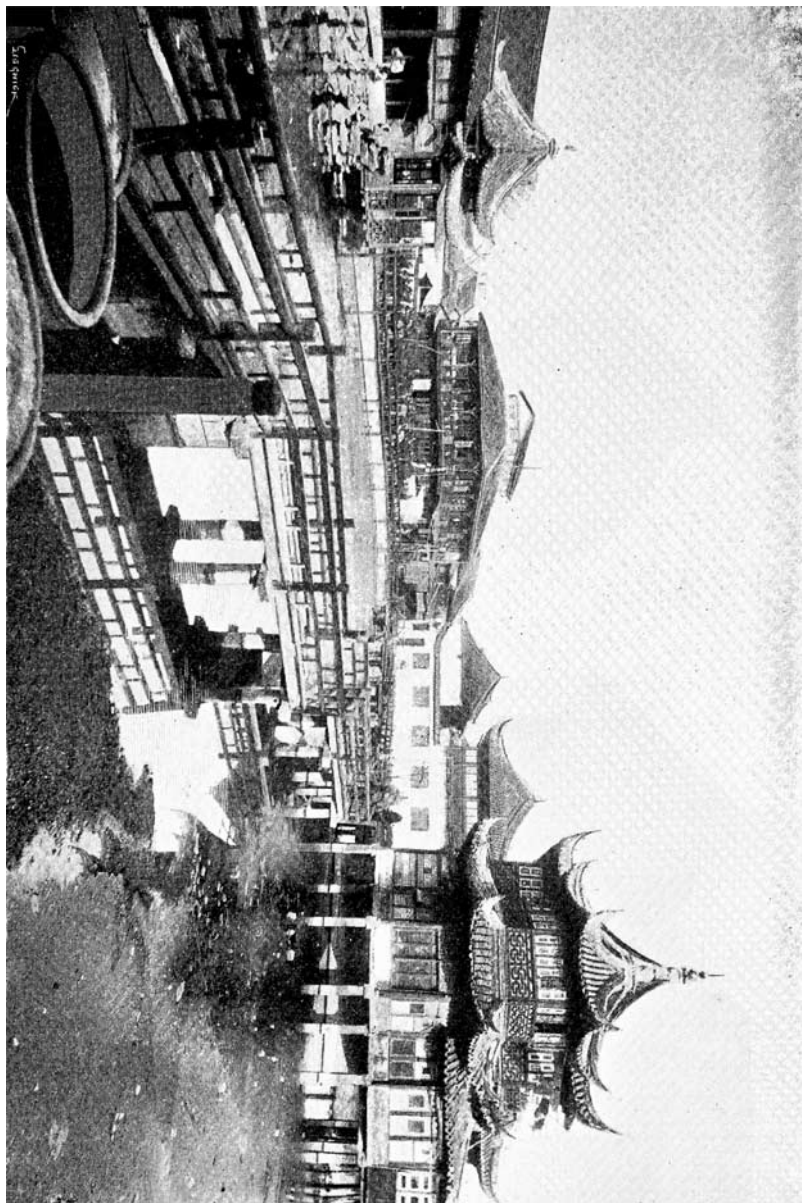
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TEA-GARDEN IN SHANGHAI CHINESE CITY.

Believed by globe-trotters to be the original of the willow-pattern plate.

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● Hankow City

and frogs hopped in numbers across the path, and bats whirled after mosquitoes. Then at last by an effort we summoned up will enough to turn, and plod just exactly the same way over the selfsame stones back to Hankow, the beleaguered city, with its avenues of over-arching willows, and beautiful Bund half a mile long—a mile walk up and down, therefore, as every one takes care to tell you the first day you arrive, as if afraid lest, stricken by a sort of midsummer madness, you should actually leave the English settlement, with its willows and its villas, and attempt to penetrate into the Chinese town.

The stories I heard about the Chinese town gave me quite a feeling of excitement the first time I went into it. People threatened me with horrible sights, and still more horrible smells. But I fancy those, who talk in this way, can know very little of the East End of London, and nothing of the South of France or Italian towns. Hankow certainly struck me as very fairly clean, considering how crowded its streets are, and the people at that time for the most part as wonderfully civil. I should not care to hear the shower of abuse, that would greet a foreigner in one of our English towns, who turned over and examined all the articles on a stall, then went away without buying anything, as English people do not hesitate to do there. The Kiangsi and Hunan Guild-houses are both well worth a visit, although the former has been in large measure burnt down, and thus stripped of those wonderful coloured tiles about which the few, who have seen them,

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are still enthusiastic. Most people have never seen them at all. As it is now, the temple to the god of literature at Hanyang has more charms for me, with its many curved roofs making such an harmonious, rich, dark medley. However, of course in Hankow no one in the month of May is thinking about architecture. “Thou art not science, but thou *tea-chest* art” is the riddle they were all engaged with, and they were very sad over it. For the tea was bad; and though the Chinamen had bound themselves under awful penalties to have no second crop, yet of course the second crop would be there soon. I looked sadly at the men from Hunan, sitting so truculently in their boats, with their pigtailed twice coiled round their heads, counting over beforehand the gains they meant to take back home; for probably there would be none. We talked tea at breakfast and tiffin and dinner, and we took it at five and considered its quality. But that would not make the people at home give up Indian tea, with all its tannin and nerve-poisoning qualities. So in between-whiles we counted up how many suicides there were last tea-season. For Chinese have a fine sense of honesty, if not of honour; and merchants are apt to kill themselves, if they cannot meet their obligations. “There will be more suicides this year,” said first one, then another.


Meanwhile, the pretty painted boxes streamed past the house at the rate of eighty a minute sometimes—always noiselessly carried by coolies in huge sun-hats, and too often through the dripping rain. And the

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PORTERS WAITING FOR WORK.

great gamble went on, and the men who dropped in to call looked wearier and wearier. But that was all in 1887, which might almost be called the last year of the great China tea trade of which Hankow had since 1861 been the centre. There was quite a fleet of ocean steamers there even that year to take the tea away; in 1898, barely one for London. English people will not drink China tea. It is so delicate that, though in itself inexpensive, it comes dear from more leaf having to be used to produce the same strength of liquor. But it is soothing, whilst Indian tea puts a fresh strain upon our already overtaxed digestions.

In old days the Hankow tea trade was a great business. Tea-tasters came out from England in